

Foxes drive birds from S. Shore

Plymouth loses terns; plover nests destroyed

By KENDRA JOHNSON
The Patriot Ledger

DUXBURY — Foxes are terrorizing coastal birds on Duxbury and Plymouth beaches, destroying the only piping plover nest at an experiment site in Duxbury and causing the colony of 10,000 common terns to flee Plymouth's Long Beach. Other plover nests also were damaged.

Scott Hecker, director of the coastal waterbird program for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, said the fox population is cyclical and this year is at a high point.

"The pressure on (the birds) this year by foxes is greater than in the past," Hecker said.

He said there is at least one fox den on Duxbury Beach and on Long Beach in Plymouth, where a fox family caused a colony of 10,000 common terns to leave earlier this month.

"They left en masse and they didn't come back," Hecker said.

Hecker said he and his staff have not been able to track down the colony, but said the birds could have gone as far as New York.

Foxes also have been preying on piping plovers, an endangered species. A fox destroyed a piping plover nest on Duxbury Beach about two weeks ago. The nest had been in the middle of an experiment site where sand was laid to cover beach grass in an effort to encourage the birds to nest there. Plovers prefer unvegetated nesting habitats.

The first pair of plovers to nest on the South Shore chose the site, but their nest was destroyed after a fox jumped over the wire fence surrounding the nest and tore through the netting on top. No other birds have nested at the experiment site.

The site, strategically located near the end of the beach away from vehicle traffic, is also only 200 feet from a fox den.

"That's one thing that wasn't perfect about the location," Hecker said.

Foxes also dug under a fence surrounding the tern colony on 6 acres of beach in Plymouth.

Hecker said he and his staff will

Please see FOXES — Page 2

Foxes driving birds from S. Shore nests

■ FOXES

Continued from Page 1

work on developing more protective fencing for the birds.

Hecker said the number of terns in Plymouth has increased every year since 1987, rising from 1,300 pairs to 5,000 pairs — almost half the state population of the common tern. The common tern, one of four tern species in Plymouth, is not endangered.

Hecker said fishermen in Plymouth will be affected by the loss of the terns because the birds help them locate bluefish and striped bass because they feed on the smaller fish that those fish eat.

Doug Gray, Plymouth superintendent of parks and forestry, said Plymouth has received a permit to trap foxes in order to discourage them from eating birds' eggs.

The two so-called live traps, or cages, were put on the beach a few weeks ago, Gray said. The beach is patrolled daily, and any foxes found in the cages are let loose. Gray said he had never used the traps before.

Gray said the affect of the foxes was apparent first with the plovers in

Plymouth. He said foxes entered the wire enclosure protecting the plover nesting area or at least intimidated the birds to the point that they abandoned their nests.

Gray said most of the plover pairs nested again after their first nests were destroyed. He said many of the second nests have also been abandoned, and that the birds may nest again.

Hecker said one plover pair in Plymouth has chicks and six pairs in Duxbury have young. He said there are also other pairs on both beaches that do not have chicks. He said the official counts on the productivity of the nests will not be taken until mid-August.

Hecker said the negative impact on the plover and tern populations in Duxbury and Plymouth is not a reflection of the birds' conditions in the rest of the state.

"In the big picture, I think the birds are doing fairly well on average," Hecker said.